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ABSTRACT

Three historically significant religions of Japan and the corresponding cultural norms are examined as they affect consumer behaviors and, consequently, marketing in that country. The religions are Buddhism, Shintoism, and Confucianism. The fundamental doctrines, attitudes, and social patterns associated with each religion are outlined and their reflections in interpersonal relationships, business relationships, individual responsibility, consumer expectations, and organizational structure are discussed. (MSE)

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WHY CULTURE SHOULD BE A KEY FACTOR IN STUDYING MARKETING IN JAPAN

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WHY CULTURE SHOULD BE A KEY FACTOR IN STUDYING MARKETING IN JAPAN

Kathryn Fenich

> "The foundation of a nation's culture and the most important determinant of social and business conduct are the religious and philosophic beliefs of a people. From them spring role perceptions, behavior patterns, codes of ethics and the institutionalized manner in which economic activities are performed." 1

Religious beliefs can affect the culture of a country in many different ways. In studying various aspects of the Japanese culture, three religions (Buddhism, Shintoism and Confucianism) seem to play a very important role in shaping the attitudes and behavioral patterns of the Japanese. In understanding the religion and how it affects the consumer, marketers will be able to develop better strategic plans incorporating this information to suit the new environment. The United States has been accused of expecting the whole world to accept their way of doing business rather than studying other cultures and adapting products for these different needs. Therefore, this paper will discuss these three historically significant religions and how their dogmas influence the culture and in turn directs the consumer behaviors.

Buddhism is considered to have three fundamental doctrines: transient existence (an individual is only alive for a short time); lack of ego ; and Nirvana or perfect tranquillity. These three beliefs are the essence which unify the three religions studied in this paper. It is perhaps these attitudes which make Orientals so difficult to

understand. While Americans might understand transient existence and yearn for perfect tranquillity, the thought of performing acts without thought for outside recognition or personal well being is very difficult. For example, in Japanese business, if a person comes up with a brilliant new idea, the idea is passed to the youngest or newest member of the work group to act as discussant for the concept. No one person is recognized as the innovator. In Japan where employment involves a lifelong relationship, personnel recognize they will have to live with a miscalculation because people don't get fired for a blunder. The department or group concerned therefore accepts the responsibility as a group for all decisions and acknowledges its errors as a group. Blaming one person, particularly someone else is not tolerated and the focus is one of working out the error as effectively as possible rather than passing the buck.

A triumvirate of beliefs come into play in the Shinto religion. The first dogma is to be grateful for the blessings of the spirits and the ancestral inheritances. A person shows devotion to the spirits and his ancestors by being digilent to the Shinto rituals which honor these beings. However, this must be done with sincerity, cheerfulness and purity of heart. The second dogma relates back to the Buddhist belief of the lack of ego. One must be helpful to others through deeds of service without any thought of reward. These service acts must help to advance the world as well as individuals because then the kami or

spirits will have a good place to live. In keeping with the acts of service, the final mandate says that the will of the emperor will lead the way and therefore, obey the emperor and pray that the country will flourish so that everyone may live in harmony and prosperity.2

In examining the belief that one should be diligent to the rituals which honor the kami and his ancestors, many cultural norms can be found stemming from this dogma. Because the kami can be wood spirits or house spirits or any object's soul, nature is very important to the rituals. Therefore, priests study nature and are aware that there exists a harmony and pattern to nature and when change occurs it is very subtle and always in balance. The Japanese believe that they are highly sensitized to these subtleties because they live on a tiny island which is dictated to by the forces of nature like the typhoons, the seas and the mountains. They have had to learn to become acutely aware of and to live with these forces. As a result, some say that Japanese view nature in a more feminine way by bending to the will of nature and accepting the power as the willow bends to the wind. This thought in turn makes the Japanese more accepting of change. In contrast, Americans could be viewed as more masculine. As an example, the American pioneers is depicted as fighting to make a home in the wilderness. He wanted to be as sturdy as an oak, but oaks do not bend they break in violent winds and many pioneers broke under the pressures of their constant battle.

Because of the belief that kami are part of the eternal forces and man is transient, the rituals become important in preserving the environment. Japanese believe that they must improve and take care of their surroundings while they are alive. They are the caretakers during their lifetime and then because one's life is so short, the responsibility passes on to their children. A person is infinitesimal in the way of things therefore it is more important to be remembered as a good person so that the future generations will be proud. This concern for how the family will be remembered makes the Japanese pay a great deal of attention to details of their work. This concern for precision can be seen in the gardens made of stones and sand which represent the vastness of the universe. These gardens are carefully raked and maintained with the utmost care. This attitude is fostered in the delicate brushstrokes of the artwork and the bonsai plants which are painstakingly detailed. Even though the work is tedious and repetitious, the workers patiently and carefully work through every detail. This is to remind the Japanese that they are but a small part of this expanse and that they do not matter in the overall plan of the universe. In Japanese business, these same traits manifest themselves in the pride of quality in their work. Since they have been taught to be patient and pay attention to detail the products they manufacture are very high quality. This standard of excellence develops a higher level of expectation of consumer goods as well.

> "The largest importer of foreign cars in Japan says his company actually takes imported cars apart, reassembles them, and repaints them before offering them for sale 'Foreigners think cars are just like their shoes. They're satisfied if the doors open and the car gets them to where they want to go., The Japanese look for livability and external appearance when they buy. Therefore, at Yanase, we have to polish the cars and put enamel on them or else in Japan they won't sell.'"3

Proctor and Gamble learned a valuable lesson about Japanese consumer attitudes toward quality when they entered the diaper market in Japan. Without any consumer research, they tried to sell American diapers to Japanese mothers. However, Japanese consumers were displeased with the product because the diaper was too simple and it leaked. Unicharm on the other hand, did their research and changed the conventional diaper to prevent leakage by changing the design to a panty-type design. As a result, they dominanted the market before P&G realized what happened.4

The same concern for quality can be seen in Japanese designed products. The esthetics are geared toward simple lines and subtle colors. The designs are portrayals of creations in nature. Understanding what aesthetics are important and how they evolved may be able to prevent some of these comments which were heard continually at the American Import Fairs. "There's nothing I want to buy from America';'a bad design'; 'garish colors'; ' doesn't suit the Japanese sensibility'; or 'won't look as pretty on the table'.5

This concern for quality and care continues with the packaging. To a Japanese consumer, how a package is

presented is just as important as the product inside. The outward appearance is painstakingly developed with tissue papers, ribbons, and painted landscapes to show that each aspect has been carefully and thoughtfully planned. Packaging also includes the product name. For example, in the U.S. alcoholic beverages are named after their refiners. (Dewar's Scotch, Johnny Walker whiskey, Sebastiani wines) However in Japan brands are named after flowers and animals which are symbolic of longevity and health, or natural images like snow and dew or names of rivers and mountains, for example White Stork wine or One Tree wine.

Both price and place are effected by the Japanese desire for perfection. Because they expect quality the first time a purchase is made, they are willing to pay the highest prices in the world for such items. This concept is continued in the consumer behaviors which show that Japanese would rather pay more money for a ready made product than assemble it himself. Of course, part of the price and place are based on the geography of Japan itself. Space is a premium on Japan so the living quarters are very small and storage is almost non-existent. Therefore, products need to be compact. Perishables are bought in small quantites and frequently. As a result there are many small neighborhoods stores which operate to cater to this continuous shopping behavior. The channel of distribution which results from catering to all these small stores is a long line of wholesalers and retailers which makes a nightmare for foreigners trying to

figure out how to get their products to market. The mountains of Japan create a transportation dilemma of how to get the products over the mountains to the small pockets of populations. This process becomes very expensive which increases the price especially since the perishables must be fresh and high quality.

The second point about the Shinto religion stems from the state without ego. This doctrine " for the good of all" starts from the time one is very young. In the U.S. children are taught right from wrong; in Japan children are taught that failure to comply results in shame for the family. This can be seen in the work life of the Japanese. They believe in working hard which can amount to 12 hours a day 6 days a week, is the key to success. To live is to work. To work is to be conscientious and make everyone proud. Unfortunately, this concern for public opinion results in a great deal of stress.

Since the first rule of marketing is to find a need and fill it, two products in particular have been discovered to alleviate stress. The trend in the US is toward vacations and exercise to ease the pressure. This has been proven to reduce anxiety however the Japanese are afraid to take the time for a vacation for fear they will lose favor with their bosses. The six day work week has also caused some problems for the recreation industry. Everyone wants the same day to exercise. The result: to reserve a public tennis court, a Japanese must attend a three hour lottery two months in

advance6 Unfortunately, the rest of the week is dead. So investors are leary of this product. One product that has become extremely successful has been introduced by NTT called Dial-An-Apology or Dial-A-Sympathy. For 40 cents, "the caller gets to shout angrily into the phone and then hear a recorded voice reply: "I'm sorry. It's all my fault. You are right". In Dial-A-Sympathy, a male voice reassures th4e caller :"Even men have difficult times. It's O.K. (sniffle... sniffle).' Each number receives 500-600 calls a day.7

Confucianism, the third religious lifestyle in Japan, should be introduced at this point to help continue the discussion on the state of egolessness or unselfish love for others and to introduce the importance of the emperor and the role of government. According to Kenneth WoodwardB Confucianism has three tenets. Each person has within himself an unselfish love or egolessness for other and this should become the goal of every person. All three religions discussed have had this philosophy as an integral part of the beliefs. The second point takes the concept of the emperor as supreme ruler a step further. In order to be a good ruler, he must first be a philosopher full of wisdom. This wisdom is a trait which can be cultivated through virtue and important relationships. A gentle decorum is required in all actions.

The concept of unselfish love for others is found in all three religions which have been discussed. This unselfish love for others has its roots in loyalty. Loyalty first

relates to the family with duties and obligations. Make the family proud. Do not shame them by disgracing oneself. Then the loyalty increases from the family to the work place and finally to the sovereign and country. This devotion has levels of importance and it is these levels which are prevalent in the vertical Japanese society. Everyone has a position in society which is clearly defined. In Helm's article in Business Week he demonstrates how important these levels are.

> "A manager at a leading Japanese company was asked by his boss to resign and move to a small subsidiary. He was willing to comply, but his wife told him not to accept the demotion because she feared it would hurt their daughter's chances of concluding an arranged marriage. Torn between conflicting demands of his boss and his wife, the manager hanged himself."9

The Japanese arts also demonstrate this vertical positioning. For example, in the Kabuki theater, it is believed that young people should have a youthful name because they are new and untried. However as the actor matures and the style of their craft has ripened, they are allowed to adopt a new name with tradition to signify their matured capabilities. In Business Japan, the author of an article explained his feelings, "Brooke Shields, who I'm familiar with as a child actress, still goes by the same name although her image has completely changed now that she is an adult. It's inappropriate."10

These societal roles also dictate consumer behaviors. For example, an important stage is reached when a young person becomes a shakajin, which is defined as a public

person or member of society. A young man becomes a shakajin when he graduates from school or starts working; a young women, when she marries. At this time, it is appropriate for them to stop wearing jeans and going to rock concerts. Some men even give up going to movies. However Suntory Whiskey has taken this concept further. They developed their product lines to suit a person's position in life. Before a person is a shakajin, they can drink the cheaper and lighter Tory or White Whiskey. Once the first job is obtained, the Red Suntory is suitable until further promotions allow the choice to Kaku. A Chief of Section is designated by Old Suntory Whiskey, the most popular brand. A Kacho or Section Manager may alternative between Old and Reserve, but Bucho or Division Head drinks Reserve.11

These societal structures also relate to personal selling. Understanding that one must be aware and behave according to their station in life is a key ingredient to Japanese selling. A salesman has a lower social position than the client therefore a certain decorum must be followed so as not to offend the customer. A salesman must act subservient to the buyer in order to show proper respect.

The second point of Confucianism is to respect the wisdom which the ruler or emperor has and in the hierarchy of loyalty, the emperor is the top of the ladder. The Shinto religion asks for total unquestioning belief in the Emperor for he oversees all things which allow the country to flourish and that allow people to live in peace and

prosperity. Since the Japanese believe that everyone is out for the good of the country, the hierarchy forms a chain of perceptions. The high ranking government official's objectives are to promote prosperity and welfare for the whole nation. Therefore whatever the government does, is in the best interest of the country and that is the most important allegiance of all. The government tries to help Japanese industry because Japanese management objectives are designed to help their colleagues achieve a stable life. If management invokes a difficult set of rules it is because they must for the good of all the workers. Therefore, workers go on strike each spring as a ritual rather than as an aggressive act. Since government and industry are doing the best that they can for everyone, consumers have some remarkable attitudes. They have fewer consumer complaints and they expect the advertisements to be true. It is a prevalent viewpoint that if a company is rich enough to advertise on television then they must make a good product. Further, it is believed that industry would not try to hurt their consumers so no hard sell pitches are needed. Rather, advertisements build expensive images, especially for gift items. A favorite scene is one person in a vastness of space. Because Japan is such a small island with many millions of people, space is expensive and sought after. However to announce the price would be to upset the subtlty of the pitch so luxurious scenes are portrayed to connote this feeling.

The belief that the emperor is very wise is because he studies constantly and wisdom comes from education. However, anyone can grow with wisdom if they honor education and are open to learning. So it should come as no surprise that the literacy rate in Japan is 99%. The educational system in Japan is highly regarded and the top schools are very difficult to enter. Children are trained from the time they are very small to push to get into the top elementary schools. Tutoring programs for all ages is a major business. Most students go to school during the day and have tutors at night. The week of entrance exams for the university is known as "hell week" and students who fail have been known to commit suicide. Even acceptable candidates may have to wait up to six years to gain admittance. However admittance to the top universities almost guarantees a secure future. The government and the top corporations select their employees from these educational institutions. Since Japan has lifetime employment in these organizations, a person's future is locked in. However, a dichotomy of values occurs at this level. Education is very important but the question is who's knowledge takes precedence, the university or the corporation. Most corporations prefer to train their own employees so that the indoctrination process of corporate values and attitudes can be properly handled. The recruiters assure college graduates that any information or knowledge they will need to know for the job will be taught by the corporation. The most important quality a student can

possess?: Compatability with others. How does this effect the college curriculum? "It is extrememly difficult to get into a good university," Atsuko added," but once you are accepted, it is easy to stay there. The university does not require you to work,, and many students hardly ever open a book. Yet they receive their diplomas just the same."12

This desire for knowledge and the negative impression that people acquire for unprepared presentations can effect seller-customer relations. Several important factors are hinged on this attitude. The first priority of a business relationship is knowledge of the seller. The Japanese spend a great deal of time trying to learn more about the salesman or liason. How a person acts and handles himself as well as his knowledge about the Japanese client's company and competitive position are key ingredients to a satisfactory start. If the buyer respects the seller , then the second phase can occur. Information about the company and all the product lines are required. These facts require not only price lists and common sales information, but a person must be knowledgable about the personnel, competitors and corporate objectives as well.

The last aspect of Confucianism deals with a gentle decorum in all actions. As in nature where everthing is in harmony and subtle changes occur, so to the Japanese believe human relations should be. One of the cardinal rules: everyone deserves to maintain their dignity and pride. To strip a person of these qualities is not acceptable. In

order to allow each individual their dignity, the Japanese do not have straight forward negative expressions. The word "no" is not part of the language, rather there are 19 different phrases which express this idea without actually saying it. This can become quite confusing for a Westerner who may demand an answer. If forced to confront an issue, the Japanese will answer "I will consider it" or "I will think about it". Japanese workers realize that this means they should reevaluate their work and redo the assignment. Complaints are never directly expressed rather a private discussion over a drink is in order.

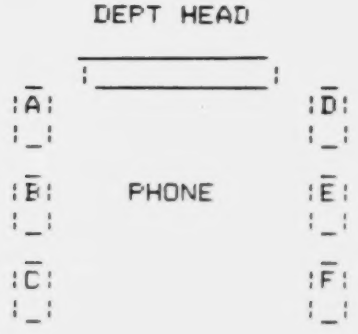
One of the social customs for developing consensus without confrontation is the nemawushi or root binding. After 5:00, rather than going home, Japanese workers go to their favorite restaurant where they have dinner and sake. This is the time for people to subtly broach ideas and ask for agreement. Companies consider this ritual part of the job and managers who take their department people are reimbursed as company expense. The ceremony of serving sake most represents this binding of comrades. Each person pours sake for the others to promote cameraderie among the workers. Sake is also an integral part of most ritual ceremonies.13

This root-binding process is very important because it allows ideas to be brain-stormed without the pressure for a decision. It is during this time that the consensus opinion is evaluated for each idea. No secrets are kept. Rather each idea must be discussed by everyone in order to learn all

the ramifications. This is also the time that Japanese buyers take the sellers out to learn more about company and the person. Japanese want to trust and make friends with a seller before business can occur. This informal atmosphere allows the buyer to exchange important personal information and to size up the person. Without this nightlife, no sales transactions will occur.

The organizational structure also emphasizes this concept of consensus. Below is a diagram of a typical department physical plan. There are no walls. Everyone can hear all the information immediately. There are no secrets. Therefore, when consensus is reached, a plan has very short implementation time because everyone already knows the plan. Therefore, while strategic marketing plans may take a long time to reach a consensus opinion, when the decision is made, the plan is instantly implemented.

ORGANIZATIONAL STRUCTURE



This paper has attempted to look at the key concepts of the three historically significant religions of Japan: Buddhism, Shintoism and Confucianism. As each religious

concept was discussed the corresponding cultural norms were portrayed. These attitudes and cultural biases were then used as the basis for analyzing how they impact on the business environment and finally marketing.

In summary, Forbes magazine wraps up the importance of this discussion.

> "There are two ways to market products in Japan - their way or not at all.
>
> That's the lesson learned all too painfully by so many companies that have tried to crack the Japanese market with products ranging from ball bearings to baseball bats. . . "14

ENDNOTES

1 Robert Bartels. "National Culture - Business Relations: United States and Japan Contrasted." Management International Review no. 2 (1982):5.

2 Japanese Religion. Tokyo: Kodansha International Ltd. [1986]:33.

3 Phyllis Birnbaum. "Honorable Fussy Customers." Across the Board (March 1986):27.

4 Zachary Schiller. "How P&G Was Brought To A Crawl in Japan's Diaper Market". Business Week (13 October 1986):71.

5 Phyllis Birnbaum. "Honorable Fussy Customers." Across the Board (March 1986):26.

6 Leslie Helm and Charles Gaffney. "The High Price Japanese Pay For Success." Business Week (7 April 1986):53.

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8 Kenneth Woodward. "Religions of Japan." Modern Maturity (December-January 1985):77.

9 Leslie Helm and Charles Gaffney. "The High Price Japanese Pay For Success." Business Week (7 April 1986):52.

10 "Traditions Still Valued in Changing World of Kabuki" Business Japan (May 1985):31.

11 George Fields. "Consumer Marketing and the Invisible Culture." East Asian Executive Reports (March 1985):8.

12 William Graves. "Tokyo: A Profile of Success." National Geographic (November 1986):621.

13 Irving Roberts. "Sake: Japanese Culture In A Timeless Flask." Business Japan (August 1986):39.

14 J.A.T. "When In Japan." Forbes 137 (10 March 1986):153.

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